



PRESS RELEASE

EU and US block Thailand's proposal to reduce sugar in baby foods

**FAO/WHO Codex Nutrition Committee (CCFSNDU)
Chiang Mai, Thailand, 3rd November 2006**

Cereal-based baby foods are an unlikely subject of controversy but this week they have been at the centre of a bitter struggle between health advocates and the multi-billion dollar baby food industry whose interests were defended by the European Commission and the United States. The controversy centered on sugar levels and the rising levels of obesity and food related diseases which are fast consuming health budgets across the globe.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission sets global standards for foods and its nutrition committee is normally held in Germany. This year it was held in Chiang Mai, in Thailand, where the Thai Government presented a proposal to reduce sugar content permitted in the baby food standard. This standard was adopted in July 2006 after 10 years of debate, pending discussion on its sugar and protein levels.

Thailand presented an outline of the problem and an analysis of the sugar content of baby foods on its market. It proposed that the permitted maximum levels of sugar in the standard are reduced from 30% to 10% of calories. India followed with a proposal that the minimum levels of cereal grains be increased from 25% to 50%. In its proposal Thailand stated that "foods for infants and young children are very crucial contributing to their immediate and long term health. Since, a high intake of sugars enhances the development of sweet taste preference and dental caries in children, and provides excessive energy intake which may contribute to childhood obesity, therefore, the sugars intake in cereal-based foods should be limited." (1)

Thailand was supported by Norway, Indonesia the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), the International Lactation Consultants Association (ILCA) and the International Association of Consumer Food Organisations (IACFO). The representative of WHO also spoke in support outlining the importance of appropriate infant nutrition.

Elisabeth Sterken, Director of INFACT Canada (IBFAN) and highlighted the dangers to health of high sugar levels in foods. Maryse Lehnert Arendt (ILCA) expressed shock at the European Commission's stand in the light of its supposed commitment to tackling obesity levels and received a round of applause from the room. Baby Milk Action's Patti Rundall, representing IACFO reminded the meeting that the Standard permits the addition of cocoa in foods for babies of 6 months along with nutrition claims, encouraging parents to believe that a sweet chocolate flavor food is good for health.

The meeting was chaired by Prof Grossklaus, of Germany, whose lack of objectivity on this issue and bias towards industry is well known. In a bizarre twist, an useful offer was made by the European Society of Paediatric Gastroenterology Hepatology and Nutrition (ESPGHAN) to convene an ad-hoc group to examine the proposals in detail. Last year, ESPGHAN had

opposed the lowering of sugar levels. In relation to this new suggestion Prof Grossklaus asked only for comments from those who disagreed – not from those who agreed. As a result, only the views of the US and the European Commission were heard and the matter was thrown out. The refusal of the EU to consider this move to reduce sugar is linked to the fact that the current EU legislation on cereal-based food permits exactly the same maximum level of sugar.

Codex standards have assumed greater importance since the formation of the World Trade Organisation, since they can be used as benchmarks in trade disputes. As a consequence the food industry turns out in force for every meeting. At the Thai meeting there were over 100 food industry delegates, half of them on Government delegations (nine of the 11-member Chinese delegation were industry, one of the two Belgian, one of the 2 for Switzerland and 2 of the 3 for the Netherlands were from industry) and half as Business interest NGOs – BINGOs – all reluctant to forgo such an easy way to hook babies onto their expensive sweet tasting foods. The UK and Canadian set a good example with delegations that were industry free.

Other issues such as WHO's Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (2), the value of fruits, vegetables and grains in providing dietary fibre and the presence of transfats in foods, also generated controversy. The food industry was adamant that synthetic fibres in processed foods were as effective as plants. IACFO's call for proposals to limit the levels of industrially produced trans-fats was blocked by the EU Commission. Denmark stated that it has already introduced limits on Transfats.

>From the 15th – 17th November, the European Commission and IBFAN members will attend the WHO European Ministerial Conference on Countering Obesity to be held in Istanbul, Turkey. IBFAN will watch with interest how the EU will present itself as a body that is serious in its intent to reduce prevent obesity.

Also under discussion at the meeting was the standard for infant formula which will now be forwarded to the Codex Commission for final adoption next July. Health advocates were relieved that the attempts by the food industry to allow health and nutrition claims on infant formula, although not halted altogether, were curbed, largely through a timely intervention by Australia. There was also controversy regarding the need to alert parents through warnings on labels to the presence of intrinsic contamination of *Enterobacter Sakazakii* and other disease-causing pathogens in powdered infant formula. WHO informed the meeting of the serious risks to health and the need to make up feeds with previously boiled water. The industry – eager to promote not only formula but also bottled water insisted that it a reference to 'safe water' was sufficient. Finally it was agreed to include a reference to boiled water, but not agreed to include a warning of intrinsic contamination.

1 The Thai proposal (CX/NFSDU 06/28/10 ftp://ftp.fao.org/codex/ccnfsdu28/nf28_10e.pdf stated that obesity in all age groups is now acknowledged to be one of the world's most serious health problems and has reached epidemic of proportions, with more than 1 billion adults overweight - at least 300 million of them clinically obese and 115 million people in developing countries suffering from obesity related conditions. Obesity accounts for 2-6% of total health care costs in several developed countries; some estimates put the figure as high as 7%. Thailand has taken steps to limit the use of sugars in infant formula and follow on formula requiring labels to state that "Sugars, honey or other sweeteners should not be added because it may cause dental caries and obesity in infants and young children".

2 <http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/en/>

WHO recommends as a global public health recommendation exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months followed by continued breastfeeding up to two years and beyond alongside safe and nutritionally adequate amounts of indigenous and local foods. (WHA55.25 2002)

"Artificially fed infants consume 30,000 more calories than breastfed infants by 8 months of age" (equivalent to 120 Mars bars - 4 a week). Student Study Guide for Breastfeeding and Human Lactation KG Auerbach, J Riordan - 1993
The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considered that there are only two potential, cost-effective interventions that can be put into place immediately to deal with the childhood obesity epidemic: decreased television viewing and breastfeeding promotion.

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